

♀ our lives

FEMINIST THEORY / lesbian feminism

WOMEN'S MOVEMENT / lesbian movement

LEGAL STATUS / marriage, divorce, ^{same} name

SEX ROLES + SEX BIFF / family roles

OTHER COUNTRIES / G. Britain

○ IN FILE OTHER COUNTRIES / GREAT BRITAIN



and
mine
too!

**Lesbian Mothers
talk to Lesbian Mothers**

CONTACTS FOR HELP AND INFORMATION

LESBIAN MOTHERS

ACTION FOR LESBIAN PARENTS c/o Peace Works, 58 Wakefield Road, Huddersfield, Yorkshire.

LYNNE A lesbian mother and lesbian custody worker, employed by Rights of Women, a feminist legal collective: Has a list of sympathetic solicitors. 374 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1. 01-278-6349 (Tuesdays)

Lesbian mother support groups are being set up throughout the country. To find out if there's one in your area, and to get general help and advice contact your nearest Lesbian Phone Line;

LESBIAN PHONE LINES

BRISTOL	0272 297500	WED. 8-10 pm.
LEEDS	0532 453588	TUE. 7.30-9.30.
LONDON	01 837 8602	MON. & FRI. 2-10 pm. TUE.-THU. 7-10 pm.
MANCHESTER	061 236 6205	MON.-THU. 7-10 pm.
BELFAST	0232 22023	THU. 7-10 pm.
DUBLIN	710608	3rd THU. OF MONTH 8-10 pm.
GLASGOW	041 248 4596	MON. 7-10 pm.
SWANSEA	0792 467365	FRI. 7-10 pm.

WOMENS AID

Offers refuge for women and children, forced to leave home because of violence from the man they live with.

WOMENS AID FEDERATION ENGLAND	01 837 9316
SCOTTISH WOMENS AID	031 225 8011
WELSH WOMENS AID	0222 388291 10-3 pm.
NORTHER IRELAND WOMENS AID	0232 49041
FOR REFUGES IN EIRE CONTACT	DUBLIN 334569

The following are advice centres which will put you in touch with a refuge or give advice and support.

BRISTOL	0272 22760	MON-FRI 10 am-4 pm.
LONDON	01 837 3762	MON-FRI 10 am-5 pm.
MANCHESTER	061 236 6540	MON-FRI 10 am-4 pm.
NEWCASTLE	0632 614511	MON-FRI 10 am-1 pm. & SAT/SUN 6.30-10 pm.
NOTTINGHAM	0602 46490	MON-FRI 10 am-3 pm.

RAPE CRISIS

Someone to talk to if you have been raped or sexually assaulted.

BRISTOL	021 233 2122	24 HOURS
LEEDS	0532 440058	DAILY 10 am-12 pm.
LONDON	01 837 1600	24 HOURS
MANCHESTER	061 228 3602	TUE & FRI 2-5 pm. WED, THU, SUN. 6-9 pm.
NOTTINGHAM	0602 410440	MON-FRI 11-5 pm.
BELFAST	0232 249696	TUE & FRI 7-1 pm.
CARDIFF	0222 373181	MON 7-10 pm. WED 11 am-10 pm. THU 7-10 pm.
DUBLIN	601470	MON-FRI 8 pm-8 am: SAT/SUN 8 am-8 pm.
GLASGOW	041 221 8448	MON.WED. FRI. 7-10 pm.

LAW CENTRES

Offer general advice on welfare rights, immigration etc.

LAW CENTRES FEDERATION, 164 North Gower Street, London NW1 2ND. 01 387 8570.

- Will put you in touch with your nearest Law Centre.

BRISTOL	021 554 0868	MANCHESTER	061 225 5711	CARDIFF	0222 498117
LEEDS	0532 491100	NEWCASTLE	0632 31210	GLASGOW	041 634 0338
LONDON	01 485 6672	BELFAST	0232 46984		

BOOKS AND MAGAZINES

Guide to Gay Custody: Available from Action for Lesbian Parents (see above).

The Law and Sexuality: Grass Roots Books Ltd; 1978. Available from: South Manchester Law Centre, 595 Stockport Road, Manchester.

Leaving Violent Men: A study of refuges and housing for battered women. Available from: Womens Aid Publications, 116 Portland Street, Manchester. 061 228 1069.

Rocking the Cradle: Lesbian mothers - a challenge in family living: Available from: Sheba Feminist Publishers, 488 Kingsland Road, London E8.

Women's Rights: A practical guide: Penguin.

Outwrite: (Monthly feminist newspaper). Oxford House, Derbyshire Street, London EC1.

Spare Rib: (Monthly feminist magazine). 27 Clerkenwell Close, London EC1.

Wires: (Three Weekly feminist newsletter). PO Box 162, Sheffield 11 UD. (0742 755290). Have information on groups, phone lines and new books and pamphlets.

INTRODUCTION

“Whatever new attitudes Parliament or public tolerance may have chosen to take as regard to the behaviour of consenting adults over twenty-one, these should not entitle the courts to relax in any degree the vigilance and severity with which they should regard the risk of children at critical ages being exposed or introduced to ways of life which may lead to severance from normal society, to psychological stresses and unhappiness and possibly even to physical experiences which may scar them for life.”

— From a speech by Lord Wilberforce in the House of Lords in 1977.

These words of ‘wisdom’ have been taken to heart and even repeated by some judges in lesbian custody cases. Their prejudice towards lesbian mothers largely reflect those of society as a whole: — we are not ‘normal’, our sexuality not only places ‘stress’ on our children, but also makes them ‘unhappy’; we are seen as child molesters, sexual perverts not to be trusted with our children. They are obsessed with our sexuality, and accuse US of that, — we’re seen as sex mad, not as people who go to work, do the shopping, and generally lead quite ordinary lives. The courts don’t want us to keep our children and won’t let us if they can possibly help it.

We are a small group of lesbian mothers. We are not sociologists, legal experts or writers. We face certain problems and we know dozens of friends facing similar problems, and we felt the need to speak out and hopefully reach other lesbian mothers.

Losing custody of our children is the biggest fear which permanently hangs over most of us. There are publications containing legal advice on what to do in contested custody cases. We do not intend to add to them here although we include some basic guidelines. None of us have had to face a lesbian custody case yet. We are finding different ways of “muddling through” without going to court, and we believe this is the reality for many lesbian mothers.

It is widely believed that only gay men have anything to fear from the law. This is not true. While lesbianism is not illegal, the general hostility towards lesbians, particularly lesbian mothers, is reflected in, and upheld by the law. Cases which come to court are few, but all reveal the prejudice, ignorance and hostility which face lesbians.

There are various alternatives to fighting for custody in court as a lesbian. Women talk about them later on. None of these alternatives get any publicity, so these women remain invisible. Lesbians often do not openly fight custody because they fear they have no chance of winning, and the ordeal would be too traumatic for themselves and their children. This injustice is not seen, which encourages the belief that there are not many lesbian mothers. Those that DO get publicity through the courts are isolated and sensationalised. The truth is we are everywhere.

We all feel we are the only ones at some time. We all feel isolation and fear and it's so hard to reach each other. We're taught that motherhood is sacred. We're taught how deep-rooted and instinctive is the mother/child bond, how much damage is done to child and mother when this bond is severed. But the horror and fury expressed towards lesbians is so strong that mothers who step out of line by becoming lesbians can be punished by the loss of their children. What is the big fear?

The biggest objection to lesbians bringing up kids is that it is supposed to harm the child. "Harm" means become homosexual. Do we "harm" our children? No-one has ever based this fear on any evidence. Anyway, is this really the issue? If we chose, we could win the sympathy of the liberals by proving we are fit parents because we're able to raise heterosexuals. But surely this is not the point. Some of us ARE trying to bring up our children to be different. We do challenge traditional ways of family life which say that women can only have children if they live with men, and that girls should be passive and boys should be tough. We are a threat to these values. This is the struggle going on underneath the authorities' interest in our children's welfare. But few women would be prepared to make such a challenge so openly in a courtroom, which is hardly surprising.

Is it any wonder so many of us are still hiding our lesbianism, from each other, from ourselves and from our children?

When we set out to do this pamphlet we invited written contributions through all the women's and gay papers. But in the end we preferred talking with women we know, then taping the discussions. We present the stories here, covering many different aspects of being a lesbian mother not just custody problems. We think these stories say far more about how things really are, in a way more honest, revealing and often moving than could be said by any expert trying to speak FOR us.

Lesbian mothers are not a category of people and this is not a sample or a survey. We don't answer questions or offer solutions. We have been able to produce only a few women's stories due to lack of space and money. There are massive areas we have not touched on, such as artificial insemination, legal access. We have not talked to children or to adults raised by lesbians, to lovers or non-biological mothers. We have not fully explored the problems many lesbian mothers face which are not peculiar to them:- bad housing, poverty, isolation. All the women interviewed got pregnant while they were living with men.

All the women interviewed are white. We have talked about the fact that there are no contributions from black lesbian mothers. The only successful interviews we conducted were with women we know well and who trust us enough to reveal painful and emotional parts of their lives to us. We don't know any black lesbian mothers who would have trusted us enough to do this, or who would want to relate their experiences of racism to us. This is not surprising because we are white.

In this pamphlet women talk about harassment by husbands and boyfriends but we know it comes from other directions too:- from other people generally, parents, neighbours or relatives, and from agencies such as the N.S.P.C.C. who we know will investigate allegations of lesbianism.

We are aware of the gaps. We would like to see more literature produced by lesbian mothers and hope our shortfalls will be regarded as openings for more literature to be produced.

All names and certain details have been changed to ensure anonymity.

KATH
Aged 32

Two daughters 4 years, 9 years.
One son 11 years.

I'd just left home and got a bedsit when I met Joe. I was 18, he was 19. I was very impressed with him. He was different, he was wild and very alive. I really fell for him. We never married but we started living together, and of course 6 months later I was pregnant. It was a shock to me though he didn't seem to mind. He always wanted me to have dozens of babies. I didn't want to have a baby at that time because the beatings had started by then. The odd slap if he was sober but real batterings when he was drunk — mostly for not doing as I was told. He'd say "*Move, I said move now!*" then I'd get a crack. I was hoping that after I'd had little Bobby that he might quieten down and he might become more responsible. But it didn't work that way. He never accepted any responsibility although he loved the child.

Then Claire came along a year later — that was another shock. I definitely didn't want another one. I enjoyed being with the babies but it was the way he was behaving. I got it into my head that he was trying to drive me daft. He was always telling me that I was mental and that I wanted locking up. I used to look after the kids and he would play with them. He would carry them anywhere but not push a pram because that's cissy. When he's taken them out it's always been a big adventure to them. They think he's absolutely wonderful.

He was drinking heavily and usually out of work. We had a Council flat and I used to see that all the bills were paid. Any money he got went on beer. The money that I claimed for me and the kids from the D.H.S.S. had to stretch to him as well. So I had to claim, else none of us would have eaten. He didn't claim for himself. He used to pinch my money if he could and go off out with it. I'd be explaining to him that that pound he took was for the kids' dinner tomorrow. "*How can you take it knowing that?*" He'd answer "*You'll see them alright. You won't let them starve*". He knew I'd borrow off neighbours. He had complete confidence in me then as a good mother.

All this time I had been very close to my mother-in-law, — his mother. She knew what he was like and it was her that saw us through weekends because she had a chip shop. I saw a lot of her. We were really close. She was like a mother to me and was really close to the kids too.

I'd left him a couple of times and gone to a friend. I'd go back either because of the kids or because I felt I had no choice. There was nowhere else for me to go and everyone kept telling me the children had a right to be with their father.

One time when I left him I met a woman who I had very strong feelings for which confused me a lot. I didn't understand what I was feeling for her and couldn't cope with it, so I went back to him — to what I knew and to what was normal. I thought those feelings were not right. Nothing ever actually happened between us. She began to realise what I was feeling so she talked to me about it. She said I must be feeling like this because she had been kind to me and cared about me and spent time talking with me and I wasn't used to that. I was very confused. It was true she'd been kind to me but all the same my feelings were still very real and very deep. When I went back to Joe I told him how I'd felt about this woman. Of course things got worse then. He'd call me names.

Over the next 5 years I left him time and time again. The only people I saw all these years was my mother-in-law and my next door neighbours. I never came across any lesbians, or rather anyone I recognised as lesbian, and I'd never given the subject much thought. It was something I knew nothing about. I knew enough to worry when I recognised those feelings. I worried about not being normal. I tried to push my feelings to one side, hoping they'd go away but they didn't.

My third baby came along when Claire was 5 and Bobby was 7. Yet another shock! I knew I didn't want another baby. I didn't think it was fair to have a third baby the way I was living — moving all the time and dragging the kids with me everywhere. He was still drinking and taking my money off me. Everytime I left Joe I had a lot of problems with the kids missing their Dad. They still thought the world of him and when he wasn't there they were quite hard to control at home and at school — especially the boy. He realised that if he was naughty enough, I'd go to his Dad so he would tell him off — and that's what he wanted. It was mostly what the little boy was going through that made me keep going back to Joe.

When I finally left him, for good, I was beginning to accept what I was feeling as a lesbian. I'd stopped battling with it in my own head. I had no feelings left for him at all — not even pity. He'd always managed to make me feel sorry for him before, but not this time. He was making great efforts too — he was off the beer and helping around the house much more. He even had a job for a while. He was really trying. I told him he had to go and that I couldn't cope with him being there any longer. I knew that this break was going to be the permanent one. I knew how I felt, what I wanted to do, I felt much stronger, more able to survive on my own. I don't know why. I can't explain it. This time there were lesbians around that I knew and it made me want the same sort of life as them, that I hadn't thought was possible before. I was confident now about my lesbian feelings. I didn't have a lover at the time.

So he left and I was in the house with 3 kids. He continued to see the kids after school at his mother's which was only up the road from me. Soon

after I did start having a relationship with a woman. Joe found out about it by pumping the kids for information. I started off denying it but he knew everything so I thought there was no point keep denying it. So I said yes. Suddenly I was no longer fit. He decided he was going to get those kids off me by whatever means he could. He'd always left me to look after them and never wanted them. There were times when Bobby, the eldest, wanted to go and be with his Dad but he wouldn't let him, saying he couldn't look after him. Now suddenly he learns this, and I'm no longer fit to have them according to him and his mother. There was nothing of that before. He told the children I was dirty and disgusting and a bad person. His mother was saying the same to them, so of course I was having a terrible time with them when they got home. The way they spoke to me and behaved was terrible. Their Dad was more or less telling them not to do as they were told for me. I was at the end of my tether. They were turning against me. The eldest two said they wanted to go and stay with their father for a bit so I let them, thinking it would just be for a while, not really knowing what I was thinking. They were aged 8 and 10. They stayed at his mother's. Then he got himself a new girlfriend and they all got rehoused.

I was left with the baby and my lover. My lover was a lot younger than me and couldn't stand the pressure that Joe was putting on us. She left me. So then I was just left with the baby. Joe was still making threats to me. It all began to get on top of me. I started drinking and taking nerve tablets at the same time. I reached breaking point a few weeks after and I finished up in a psychiatric hospital for 14 days. I know I was in quite a bad way then. When I got out of hospital and went back to the house (I still had the baby then) Joe turned up again with his new girlfriend and told me he would be watching the house and warned me I'd better not have any lesbians coming there. My memory is really vague about all the things that happened during this period. The hospital put a social worker on to me to see if I was coping with the baby and to see what was going on. The psychiatric reports had gone into the lesbian thing. I was terrified of not appearing to be coping in front of this social worker. I went to pieces when I knew she was coming and got drunk out of sheer panic.

Around this time Joe attacked two Women's Aid workers I knew, just because he assumed they must be lesbians too. He went for them with a chisel. He was constantly watching the house. It was terrifying. One day my mother-in-law was looking after the baby and she let Joe take the baby away with him so he had all three. But he was back on the beer again by this time so Social Services were not particularly satisfied with this arrangement. I kept trying to get the kids back — they wanted to come back to me now because their Dad was drunk all the time. But I knew he would have come straight here and literally killed me if I'd taken them. I talked to this social worker. She was really good. She said I must either take the kids, leave town and go into a Women's Aid refuge in another town, OR put them into voluntary Car because it was not right

to keep wandering around here with them and Joe was drinking and not fit to look after them. Eventually the social worker decided that the kids should be asked what they wanted. The two eldest went into a separate room and talked about it and came out and said they didn't want to go into a refuge, they'd go into voluntary Care for the time being. So they all three went into Care that day while she was to make enquiries into Joe's situation and mine and decide what was to happen to them. .

While they were in Care, Joe and his mother were buying things for the kids – every week a carrier bag each full of sweets, crisps, toffees, toys and money. I was going to see them and they'd keep on saying *"Isn't my Dad wonderful"*. It wasn't fair because I hadn't the money to do that. He told Bobby he'd decorate his bedroom in United colours for him and buy him a bike. The social worker told him the presents would have to stop. Joe's mother wrote them letters saying *"Daddy misses you and is crying and lonely because your Mum won't let him have you. He wants you back"* and so on. This upset the kids. They felt sorry for him.

Joe had dried out in the detox. unit and was playing the perfect father bit. Eventually Bobby said he wanted to go to his Dad. Claire wasn't sure but really she wanted to be wherever Bobby was. I knew that even if I got a transfer to a different area it wouldn't take Bobby long before he'd found his Dad or his Gran and that leaves me back to square one again because he'd know where I was. I talked a lot with the social worker. She saw Joe as well. The social worker was impressed with the efforts Joe had made and suggested we let him try and see how he got on having the kids, since that's where they wanted to be at that time. Joe saw a solicitor and had begun proceedings to get legal Custody. His case against me was my lesbianism but he was saying that all sorts had gone on in front of them, which wasn't true. Sex orgies and everything, couples in every room doing it in front of them and so on. I got angry and retaliated by saying what he was like: violent, alcoholic, never wanted the children before and so on.

I saw a solicitor who warned me that if we carried on slinging mud at each other like this and it went to Court, the Judge could decide we're neither of us fit to have them and that they'd be better off in Care. I didn't want to go through a battle like that in Court. I didn't want the children taken into Care. So when the social worker suggested I let Joe try and look after them, I agreed. In return he dropped the Court case, and agreed I could have access. I've actually got legal Custody of them still because it never got to Court.* So he took the kids to live with him I had been wanting to take them and move to any refuge in the country to keep them with me but they didn't want to move again.

* Because she is not married to him she automatically has legal Custody.

All this happened about 2 months after my spell in hospital, and there were times when I was still confused and in a bit of a state. I think that was because I couldn't get over this sudden change. I'd never been an unfit mother before. Everything changed so suddenly. He'd always said I was capable of looking after them. Even when he was stealing the food money he knew I'd do alright by the kids. He knew I was a fit mother. But now suddenly I'm not. I hadn't done anything. I hadn't stopped looking after them. I hadn't changed as a person. It was a really difficult period for the children. It wasn't fair on them. They were going up to his mother's and they were being told there how I was dirty and awful and evil. They'd come home, behaving really bad with me – but it was what they were being taught to do. They'd been told *"If your mother asks you to do something, tell her to go do it herself"*. Then I was telling them off for all the cheek and backchat.

I could see what all this was doing to the kids. His mother turned against me completely. Her reaction was a shock to me. After us always being so close. She always understood why I left him before, and once I'd even had her living with me. She just turned. It was as though I'd suddenly become a different person – a monster. I didn't expect her to agree with lesbianism but nor did I think she'd reject me like that. She refuses even to speak to me – to this very day.

So I was on my own, and Joe still kept turning up unexpectedly to let me know I was being watched. I never felt safe in the house. I used to drink when I was frightened, or not coping with my feelings at that time. I was missing the kids. It wasn't fair. He'd never provided for them. They're not even in his name. I'd always had them and done everything for them on my own. There isn't a day goes by I don't miss them. And it gets worse not better. But I'm not going to go and snatch them and run away because it wouldn't be long before Bobby would find his Dad. Then his Dad would find me, and take them away again. And next time he'd go through with legal action and I dread to think what he'd do to me if I tried that.

I am resentful. It just isn't fair. I feel, like any mother, that nobody else can look after my kids the way I can. It's hard watching his girlfriend handle my baby in a way I wouldn't. But it's her way. I can't interfere in that.

When the two eldest are old enough to understand I'm going to explain everything to them. They'll form their opinions and decide what they think of me. They've heard a lot from Joe and very little of my side. Little Bobby uses words like *"queer"*. Claire doesn't really understand why I'm not with her – not really. But still, nothing will ever alter the fact that I'm their mum. I had them until they were 8 and 10, so there's something of me in them, some of my standards. I will be able to talk to them about it all. They'll remember things and there'll always be that bond. They'll

remember enough to question the truth about what they've been told about me. Their dad told Claire that I only put her a clean dress on every three weeks. But last time I visited she took me up to her bedroom to ask me in secret about that, because she remembers it wasn't like that, and she wanted me to say. But the youngest could be told anything about me. I feel I've lost her even more than I've lost the other two. I miss her the most. She's changed such a lot. It feels like she's someone else's little girl, she's being brought up differently. She calls Joe's girlfriend "mum". She doesn't run to me. She was only 2 when he took her. I'm frightened I'll never be able to be close to her, that we will have lost that bond, that her memories won't be long enough. All she knows is that her mum gave her up.

You can't know what I go through every visit, the agony of coming away and leaving them. Before each visit I'm in bits. It's worse still when I've come away. Everything inside me is telling me to run off with them, but I'll just continue to visit. I think that's all I can do.

Other women try and understand what it's like to lose your kids, but unless you have, you don't really know what goes on inside. A lot of my friends didn't know how to help me at the time. There I was, having a breakdown and losing my kids and there didn't seem to be much they could do to help. They tried.

I've no complaints about my particular social worker. She was understanding. In fact Joe decided she must be a lesbian too because she was so sympathetic to me.

I live with my lover now. Joe has stopped threatening me. I'm relatively happy apart from this big gap in my life where my kids should be. I get a lot out of my relationships with women, particularly my lover. I'm a lot more fulfilled in life in many ways than when I was heterosexual. I just wish, looking back, he hadn't found out as quickly as he did. It might have made some difference to the way things have turned out.

JANET
Aged 37

Three daughters 17, 16, 12 years
One son 11 years

I was adopted by a couple who had three daughters. I had a really happy childhood. I was loved and free. I went to secondary modern school and was involved with C.N.D. from the age of fourteen onwards. That's where I met the father of my children. It was a pretty tough school — all girls, loads of rockers whom we all revered. We were treated as factory fodder

by the school. We got a "social education" rather than any education in the classroom. I left at fifteen. We were all beatniks at that time — so was he, Stuart, although he'd been to grammar school. We were in this C.N.D. group together.

I started a Nursery Nurse course at college. It was residential, but I kept up all the C.N.D. activities and still saw my mates. Around this time Stuart started nicking cars — joy-riding, motorbikes. No-one understood why. He already had a motorbike his dad had bought him. Presumably it was a way of impressing our friends, but no-one was impressed. I thought it was really mean taking someone else's scooter and wrecking it. He went to Detention Centre in the end over it. He wouldn't stop doing it. I visited him in Detention Centre and carried on seeing him for a while.

I'd spent a year hitch-hiking around Europe, then moved to Bristol where I got a flat. One night he suddenly turned up, after I hadn't seen him for eighteen months, and said, "*Help me, I'm on the run*". He was still doing it, you see, so I put him up. That's when I got pregnant. I didn't think of it as a long-term relationship because I didn't like him very much. He was a liar. We led very separate lives, although we shared the flat. But I did want a child — I planned to get pregnant. Once I had, he became really caring towards me, and was really into the baby when she arrived. Around this time we got married, purely to help him with this Court case. As far as I was concerned I never considered the implications of a legal marriage.

We all three moved to Birmingham because he got a place at University. This was a sort of "straightening out" process for him. I was really happy about the baby. I'd had a romantic image about me and my kid going off and doing things, and life did seem to be living up to my expectations. The baby, for me, was not a part of settling down, not a part of marriage. I had a job and he was around quite a lot so we shared looking after her.

The next baby arrived very soon after the first. She was an accident and I was very taken aback at the news — I got told when I went for my post-natal that I was pregnant. I was absolutely shattered, but he was pleased, saying how "*we didn't want to have an only child, did we?*" etc. It was too late to think about termination so I had the second one and I still kept things up outside the house so I never felt cooped up with them. I had a job working with kids where I could take mine along.

When his course finished, we all moved to where he'd got a job — to a lovely place where we rented a cottage in the countryside. It was beautiful. I worked in the local school nursery class. That was a really idyllic period. We had a lot of close friends around. I spent all my time with my friend, Helen, and we didn't see much of our husbands.

Stuart left teaching and got a job in computers for more money. That was it really. Up until that point our politics were just about compatible. But now . . . he was fancying himself as an executive and so on. When he

wanted us all to move again because of his job I refused. Me and Helen wanted to stay where we were and make a go of it alone. We were supposed to dutifully follow our men willy-nilly when it wasn't what we wanted to do at all. He had a fit — he couldn't believe it. By this time I'd had another two children and Helen had two. But Helen couldn't go through with it — she joined her husband eventually, and I stayed on my own with the four kids for nine months. The youngest was just a tiny baby. I was still working and I was quite happy.

I eventually moved up North to join Stuart, which was a pretty stupid move. I found myself in the Stockbroker belt. Oh God. I had no idea how awful it would be. Stuart's new job meant he was never around. He shot to the top, became a company director, turned into a monstrous egotistical shit. He never saw the kids — too busy with his executive life, expense account and affairs with women. I never wanted anything to do with the people he mixed with: they were all racist, snobbish and reactionary.

Stuart started treating me as his little "wife", which I'd never wanted to be. Why did I stay? My feelings for him were all wrapped up in pity. I know now that it wasn't love because I've been in love since, and it wasn't love. I didn't feel as if I needed him because of the children. I could cope perfectly well on my own, but would have felt guilty about taking the children away from him. I also stayed with him because we'd been involved with each other for over twelve years, and you get committed in relationships. I'd never been involved with anyone else. He had affairs, but by that time I wasn't bothered.

I was more into my women friends — my women friends that I've always been really close to emotionally and politically, and still am. That's always been so for me, it wasn't a sudden development.

There was a particularly close friend who had moved near to us — Rosie. Apart from her, I was isolated in this semi-detached. I never saw any of Stuart's money, which was hard, having four young ones.

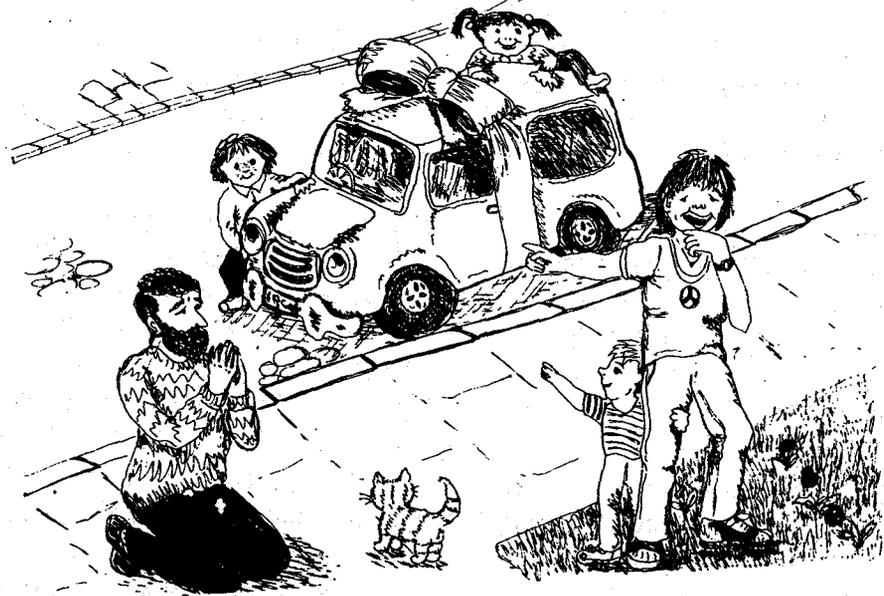
One night some women were round at the house. He came in in his suit and went straight out again to the pub, leaving us all sitting drinking wine and talking. After the pub he came back with loads of men making loads of noise, slamming car doors, and he woke Adrian up, the baby. He walked into the living room in the middle of all these women and said, *"What the fucking hell's going on here? You're sitting here drinking while the kids are running around upstairs"*.

That must have been really it. I didn't say anything. I put the baby back to bed, he'd only been having a pee, and realised I couldn't go back downstairs. (All the women were leaving anyway because these men had arrived.) Then Rosie came upstairs and kissed me goodnight in a way she'd never kissed me before. I thought that was maybe her way of saying, *"It's alright, I understand"*, but she came round the next morning and said, *"I think I'm in love"* and I said *"Yes, so do I"*

I started having a relationship with her. Stuart at first thought it was really funny but then later on he couldn't handle it. The next year was awful, really intensely awful. He used to say *"At least if it was a bloke I could go and hit him"*. So he was more threatened over this woman than he would have been over a man. He got pretty desperate. He once offered me a new Mini Clubman Estate, if I'd give her up. I couldn't believe it! I just burst out laughing and said *"You really don't understand do you?"*

We worried a lot about the children. We'd spent loads of time trying to talk and reach a solution, some way of living together for the children's sake. He used to say, *"Well, you must realise I'm a company director"*, and I used to say, *"Well, you must realise I'm a lesbian."* It was stupid. Anyway, he moved out, but carried on coming to see the children.

Six months after he'd moved out I got these divorce papers completely out of the blue. Of course it was all about lesbianism. The papers said I had cut my hair short and started wearing mens' clothes. (I'd always worn jeans). He said I'd taken off with a lover and left the children. This was all complete lies. I'd also neglected the children and family life, etc. So I was just reeling, thinking *"My God, he's after custody of the children!"*, but when I turned the page he wasn't, he didn't even want joint custody. Custody, care and control to me, and reasonable access to him. So I thought *"The idiot, what is he doing?"* I took legal advice and found out that if this went ahead, the children could be taken into Care! I contacted his solicitor and said, *"Does Stuart really want to see the children put into Care?"* He didn't, so he dropped it. It had just been Stuart trying to get at me through the legal system. But he did continue to keep up the reasonable access, which was okay, and the divorce went through without allegations being made.



"He offered me a mini-clubman if I gave her up . . ."

I soon left that house and moved to Birmingham. Stuart disapproved of my moving with the kids into an inner city area and kept going on about the state of the schools.

Stuart wants to try and get the kids off me now, especially the youngest. But now the kids would have quite a large say in it themselves because of their ages. If he pulls the lesbian thing out of the bag again, I just say, *"You've been fully aware of that all the time you were living with me, since the kids were babies, and you were happy to let me bring them up"*.

He could get them by offering them things that I can't provide to make them want to live there rather than with me. There's nothing I can do about that. I can't be selfish and demand that they stay with me. There are dreadful disadvantages in living where I do . . . kerb crawlers, and so on. When you've got three daughters . . . my ten year old has been stopped by a man on her way home from school . . . It's alarming. And they know they could have all those things he has. Money talks. It's different with older kids. What I want to say is "They're mine! They're staying with me now and always", but you can't when they're older. You have to listen to what they want. I hope they always want to stay with me, but you couldn't blame them if they choose him.

My daughters are really lovely young women. Stuart thinks they're a bit too strong and assertive for how women should be. He thinks that's the effect of having me for a mother. He'd love to have custody of the children now, particularly the younger ones, so that he can instil into them what his values are: — discipline, smart school uniform, all that shit. He thinks I'm poisoning their minds. Their weekends with him are just debriefings. They know that. The kids can't remember me being anything other than lesbian.

When I first slept with a woman I thought of all the women I'd loved before, but there'd been no sexual realisation. When you first call yourself a lesbian it's the point of knowing, realising something which isn't new in you. I had always loved women. I could have loved them sexually, but I hadn't. Those feelings were pushed down — those incredibly intense feelings which get negated by labelling them as crushes. Then I had to go and do something "normal" like get a boyfriend. I fell for all that. And I thought I wasn't going to conform like all the previous generation had, but I did.

My kids relate to my lovers pretty well because it's been women who have always known and loved the kids beforehand, and whom the kids really loved. They still see Rosie now, even though I'm with someone else. It's been her choice to continue her relationship with the kids and my relationship with Rosie is still good too.

The kids have always been open to friends and neighbours about the fact their mum's a lesbian. Joanna, the eldest, was telling me the other day in this pub, *"I'll never forget when you used to turn up at my school open*

days at primary school with your women friends, all dressed in patched denims and stuff. Everyone else's mum was with their husbands. I used to fall through the floor with embarrassment. But the next day all the kids used to come up and say "Was that your mum? I wish my mum was like that. You're really lucky!"

The thing that really gets to Stuart now is his son, not the other three. He's coming up to puberty. Stuart first started going on about schools. But what he really meant was the boy's school. Where Stuart lives, the schools are better equipped and less overcrowded and Stuart goes on about *"Richer quality of life and better schooling, which is more important for Adrian than the girls"*. That makes me really angry.

Even though Adrian's a boy and I'm very woman-orientated, we've never had real difficulties in our personal relationship. I know there's a socialisation process which is going on and maybe we will have problems in the future, I don't know. It can happen to heterosexual mothers who see their sensitive boys turn into hard men who don't any longer want to talk to their mothers, despise them. I imagine that must be awful, seeing someone you're close to disappear like that. I hate to think what might happen to Adrian when he's grown up because he's such a lovely person now.

Looking back, the only thing I regret in my life is wasting all those years with Stuart. If I could start again, I wouldn't fall into that trap again. I've never regretted having the children.

LINDA

Three daughters 8, 5 and 2 years.

I was just 18 when I had my first baby. I'd been living with this bloke for a year. I wanted to have a baby, but you couldn't say she was planned because I hadn't thought about it that much. Everybody wants kids when they're that age, don't they.

This bloke was dead handsome. I'd always fancied him — so did all the girls. He was quite a catch. He could have taken his pick but he never really bothered much with women, so if you got him you'd really done well. I think he hated women. I'm sure now he did. I kidded myself that he was nice underneath it all.

After I'd had the baby he started getting violent. He'd always been dead hard and aggressive so it didn't come as any shock to me the first time he hit me. I just took it. I never even answered him back. I became really frightened of him. I thought he was capable of killing me.

I thought about leaving, but I didn't know how to set about it, where I could go. I didn't know about refuges. I once went back to my mum but he came and fetched me. I thought I'd just have to make the best of it. I stayed with him 6 years.

The second baby was an accident. I wanted an abortion, but I couldn't get one. The reason I wanted an abortion was the baby wasn't his. If he'd found out he'd have bloody killed me. But he never suspected a thing. He just thought I daren't do a thing like that. I daren't I just did! He never found out though.

When I finally left, it wasn't anything in particular. Something just clicked in my head. He was out. I just bathed the kids, got all our stuff, called a taxi and asked to be taken to a refuge. Once I got there I felt safe. He did find me and started causing trouble, but by that time I was in a better position to stand up to him. I told him to fuck off. He was really shocked.

It was a long time before I came to think of myself as a lesbian. I'd had encounters with girls at school. We used to have snogging sessions. I thought what I was doing was something that everyone did, but when I got to 15 and I was still doing it, I realised that's what they call 'queer' so I stopped. We all used to call lesbians names because we thought they must be perverts but what we were doing was alright. I thought they were all butch, and I just couldn't imagine what they did to each other dildoes or whatever. I just knew I wasn't one of them. I was just being normal and natural.

After that I was never open about fancying women until I got to know some lesbians. I moved to another town to get away from him, and got in with some lesbians. Once I knew it was OK, I was open about my feelings. I fell madly in love with this lesbian. Oh I was sick! But I had no chance. She was part of the clique of lesbian feminists which I wasn't in; I was supposed to be straight. But I tried hard for months. I started socialising with these women, started dressing like a dyke, had my hair cut, went to gay discos, the lot. I eventually plucked up the courage to tell this woman that I thought I was a lesbian. At that moment her lover walked in and joined us. I nearly died. I felt a right fool. I just didn't think they took me seriously. It really disheartened me.

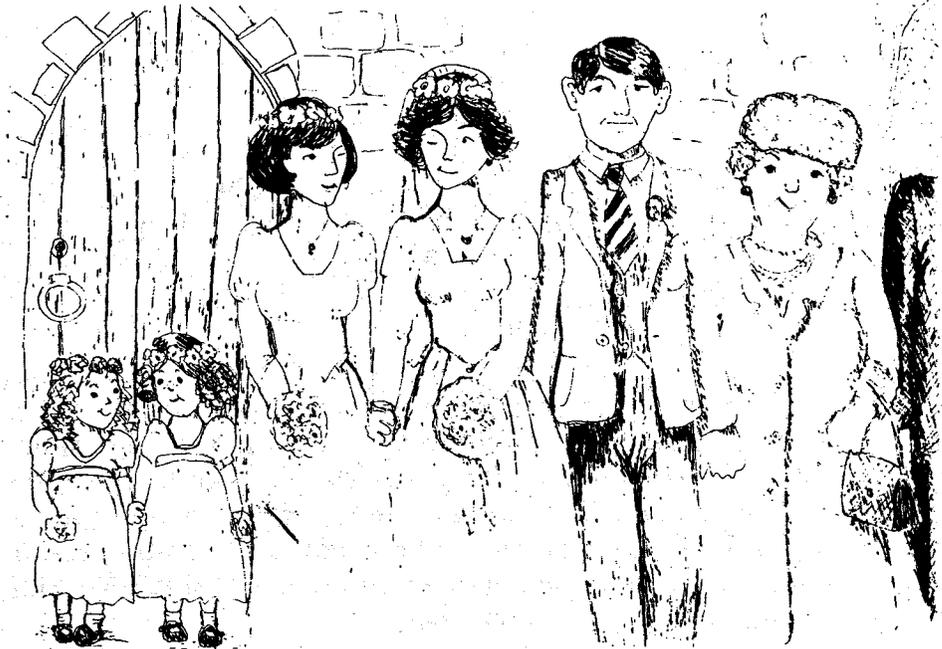
As far as lesbianism was concerned I began to think I was just kidding myself. I had kids to bring up on the social. I wasn't like these lesbians who are free. I couldn't be like them even though I wanted to be. I'd never heard of lesbians with kids. I know now that there's loads of them, but at the time I didn't know any, so I thought I'm trying to live up to something I can't be. I can't have that lifestyle and be a mother. I couldn't stand it if anyone took the kids off me. I'd heard about lesbians losing their kids, so that also made me retreat into being a het.

So I got friendly with this plumber, Dave. He was kind, he did loads of jobs in my house for nothing. He started coming up to my house to babysit. But I began to go out with the women less and less. I ended up marrying him. I'd never fancied him, but I'd been on my own with the kids for some time. Everybody needs somebody, don't they. I was pregnant and I thought, having three kids will be so much easier with him around to help. He had money, he was really good with the kids and I felt I owed him something for all that he'd done for me. We had a beautiful white wedding. I never placed much importance on the legal bit. I thought oh, it's just a bit of paper. I can always get a divorce.

But it was OK at first. He was really into the kids, thrilled about me being pregnant. He was the first person who had ever wanted my kids. The other two were never wanted. It was a nice feeling having a baby that somebody wanted.

It was after the baby came along that things started to go wrong. The other two got their noses pushed out while he spoiled the baby. He had this big thing about 'his' child. I felt trapped and resentful that he'd brought me down again. I'd just begun to get a bit strong and independent, and there I was, back to square one, but with three kids now not two. And I thought "I fell for it again". Things got worse. I started to hate him. He knew he wasn't wanted, so took things out on the middle child and doted on the baby.

I started going out again with my women friends, going to women's meetings and gay discos. He didn't stop me. I eventually asked him to leave,



"We had a beautiful White Wedding"

and he did, although he was upset. He knew he was being asked to leave partly because of my feelings about women.

I mixed with lots of women but didn't sleep with anyone. Like a fool I told Dave about my feelings. He was very understanding and said it was a passing phase. He was still really into the baby, but not the other two. He had her every weekend, which was OK.

After a while he started putting the screws on me. He said he didn't want his baby being brought up around lesbians, and if that was likely, he would try and get her off me. Then he started snooping around looking for evidence. He used to search through my things when he came to the house. I'd written something on a bit of paper — my ideas on lesbian feminism, and he found it in the rubbish bin. I had no idea he had it. I was being really careful and secretive now about what I did. I knew he knew about my feelings, but he'd never had any proof that I'd done anything. I went to a solicitor to start separation and custody proceedings. I wanted to get custody before there was anything for him to find out.

When we arrived outside the Court, he suddenly produced these bits of paper he'd found in my bin, all pasted onto card, and said *"You try and screw me for maintenance and I'll show the court this and go for custody."* He was acting on his solicitor's advice. My solicitor advised me to drop the application for maintenance so that the lesbian allegation would not come out. And I hadn't even slept with a woman.

That was the start of it. Because I let him do that — force my hand, he knew he had something on me. I knew it too, so I had to be nice to him. I was too scared of it going to Court. Everytime he came to pick the baby up, I'd let him in. Every week I thought, "Right, next time I won't let him in," and every week I chickened out.

He was still being nosey and making remarks like *"Have you got a girlfriend yet?"*, which I ignored. It was like having to lead a double life. Any letters I got I had to have sent to a friend's house. I daren't have women friends visit the house in case the kids told Dave. I knew they'd tell him and I knew what he'd try and make of it. I felt everyone was watching me after he'd moved out — seeing who I had in — neighbours, schoolteachers, everyone.

I eventually started having a relationship with a woman but it was really difficult. I couldn't let her come to the house. We had to stay at friends'. She lived away. I'd say, *"Come up this weekend, such 'n' such a body's away and we can have their house, and I'll find someone to mind the kids."* That was a real strain. It not only upset that relationship, it also upset my relationship with my kids. I was lying to them. I wasn't telling them where I was going, staying away for two days, leaving them with someone else and feeling really guilty. It was too much. I asked her to stay once

and in the morning the kids just couldn't wait to tell. They'd known all along that something secret was going on. So once the kids had told him, I said yes, it was true, because I'd had enough. Of course, he started going on about not having his daughter near any of these 'dirty freaks of nature', and that I was not to have anybody come to the house. I still felt I had no choice but to go along with it, keeping in with him.

At this time he didn't have a house, so he wasn't in any position to take her off me. But I knew his game was to wait until he was nicely set up, then he'd take her. So I was just trying to keep him sweet, hoping he wouldn't. I still couldn't face a Court case, and I knew even if I got away from him, I'd still have to face up to everything eventually wherever I went.

After a year of this I was a nervous wreck. I went back to my solicitor and said *"I'm a lesbian and my husband's going to try and get the baby."* She said *"Call his bluff. Tell him you're not letting him have her again, and that he can go to Court if he wants."* So that's what I did. There was a massive row. He was demanding that I let him have her full time. I was saying *"You can't take my child off me. I'm a good mother and you know it."* Then he brought his mother into it. There was the two of them saying they'd drag me through every Court in Europe. His mother threatened to tell my first bloke where I was and what I was. I was shitting myself. I just couldn't handle it. I gave up. I said he could take the baby. I couldn't face carrying on the secrecy. I knew even if I won custody I'd have their spying eyes on me all the time, waiting for me to slip up.

The eldest girl got a bit disturbed by all the upset: me being in such a state, and thinking we were going to have to give up the baby. She was crying at school one day and told the teacher everything. The teacher called in Social Services. The social worker came to the house and she already knew everything about me. She was very nice about it all, but it's still awful being watched.

So just when I'd prepared myself for him to come and take the baby away, he turned up and said *"I've changed my mind"*. I couldn't believe it. I said *"What?"*

He'd thought about the realities of having a baby around all the time, not just weekends. He works, so he would have to find someone to mind her while he was working. He didn't want to do that, and he realised it wasn't going to be that convenient. He said *"I'll let you keep her if you promise not to flaunt it in their faces, having women coming to the house."* He was still putting the conditions on me, so I thought, now is the time to take a stand. I said *"No, I'm not complying with any of your conditions any more. To say don't have anyone in the house, you might as well say don't be a lesbian, so forget it. I'll do what I want."*

So I've still got her. He still takes her at weekends, but I can more or less live as I please now, and be open with the kids. I'm not nasty with him. We've been getting on alright recently.

The biggest worry is that as soon as he gets another girlfriend he'll try and get the baby again. But I just think, the longer I've had her, the better, and the longer he's known about me being a lesbian, the better. I'll just have to see.

BETH
Aged 32

Son Alan, 5 years.

I live in a shared house: four women and two children. We've lived together for four years.

I am responsible for Alan but it's great having other people around to babysit. They're always willing to step in and help because I don't ask too often. I do most of the work to do with being a mother, but I also have a special relationship with Alan that they don't have. None of the other women in the house are lesbians. That's partly why we lead such separate lives. But I like it that way.

I wasn't a lesbian when I moved in. A few months after moving here I fell in love with a woman. The women in the house happened to know and like this woman so they were really pleased at the news. I got a lot of support for what I was doing at the time. We don't talk about it much now. No-one pries. No-one asks me any questions, whilst, at the same time nobody really understands what my relationships are about — it works both ways. You don't get the intrusion but also you don't get the understanding that you would get from living in a lesbian household.

But, to go back a bit, to Alan's father; he was the only man who ever really mattered to me. I lived with him for five years and moved out when I was three months pregnant. Moving out, and after moving was the most difficult period of my life. I hadn't planned to get pregnant but decided to go ahead and have the child with him. I had thought in terms of having the child with a partner not on my own.

The biggest thing that made me leave was that he started taking heroin. When I was on my own and pregnant I was terrified and very fucked up. All the time I was pregnant I wanted him to change and for everything to be alright. I had been in love with him and couldn't see past him. I wanted him to stop being a junkie but it was no good. For a whole one and a half years I stayed in the area, still hoping I suppose. I didn't have the strength

to cut him out of my life while he was around, so he continually upset my life with the baby.

There wasn't anyone else around then who was into this baby, but I was. I was happy to have this baby that everyone else saw as a nuisance. He was the most important thing that had ever happened to me. It was difficult when baby cuts a tooth or takes a first step and there's me, so excited, and no-one else even had a relationship with that baby. I'd rush up and tell someone, and they'd look at you as if you're just some pathetic silly female going on about some bloody boring baby.

So there I was on Supplementary Benefit living on my own. I didn't want my mother too involved. I didn't want to run home to mother, or ask for help. I took a sort of pride in the fact that I was doing it all on my own. I must have been lonely, but I was happy with the baby. He was an easy child to care for, still is.

I came through the difficult patch (being pregnant and alone) having nightmares about it all, ending up with nerves and all that, then having the baby was a turning point, because I loved the baby and what's more I was **coping**. I was so proud of myself and of my baby and of my independence — that gave me strength. I felt conscious of being a strong woman for the first time ever.

When baby was one year, I left the area, moved two hundred miles away and got him into a nursery. It was like starting a new life. I didn't know anyone here when I arrived. I began to seek out female company, especially single mothers. Men gradually began to figure less in my life. That wasn't a sexual thing. It was a deep need to mix with women like myself. Having moved, started afresh, I was in a position to make choices about who I wanted in my life. I looked up ads for rooms to let, flats, etc, until I found this place.

I made friends with a crowd of women. Some lesbians, not all. I was really having a good time then — out every night. That was liberating in itself, just feeling so relaxed and at home in their company and close to them. I also thought that because I'd had a satisfying relationship with a man in the past I wasn't a lesbian. That somehow this was rigid. I was het., they were gay. We could all go out together, have a great time and so what?

Obviously, looking back I was closing my eyes to parts of myself I hadn't yet discovered. I had never felt any uneasiness about being around lesbians but these friends I made I thought the world of. They never questioned my heterosexuality apart from the odd leg pull. I never talked to them about men.

Then it happened. It knocked me for six. It was sudden and decisive. After I'd slept with this woman for the first time I knew I'd never sleep with a man again. It was just sexual at first but it grew into love. I loved her. I

left it up to her to make the first moves since she was the lesbian after all. But after that I was like a duck to water — never looked back.

I clung to the idea for a while that perhaps I was bisexual — frightened to let go of the heterosexual world entirely because I had a son to bring up. I was also frightened because I knew that this was something really different, she was a woman. I couldn't just take it lightly and casually like with men. This mattered.

I was conscious on one level that I was doing something that would complicate my role as a mother with a son to bring up, but I didn't know anything about problems lesbians had fighting custody. Other than worries over my kid I didn't have any problem about realising I was a lesbian. No disapproving friends or relatives — it was a happy period for me. I was getting so much out of relationships with women.

All this never affected Alan in any way because he was still a baby, but he doesn't say very much about it even now. The women I've been involved with have had good relationships with him. I couldn't love a woman who didn't like him or whom he didn't like. He's really easy going.

Living as I do with other women around taking an interest in Alan has made it easier for him to adjust to my having lovers. He's not used to having just one person around him all the time. He's always mixed well with other people. Change in lovers is not traumatic for him. My ex-lovers are still around as my closest friends. It's not like losing one parent suddenly after a great upheaval in family life. It's more someone new appears in our life gradually, or someone is gradually around a bit less. It's never disturbed him. Maybe he's just a really secure child.

A lot of my friends are lesbians who haven't got children. Sometimes they overlook things that are huge realities for me . . . That is getting up in the mornings, needing a babysitter, and so on. I'd say women without kids should be more aware of babysitting problems. Whilst all my lovers have taken an interest in him, it's been clear with every relationship that he's my child. That sounds possessive, but it's not that I'm possessive. What I mean is, there's never been any confusion about what roles people have had. No confusion about who's got the right to make decisions over his future because it's clear that I'm the one who takes responsibility for him, and I'm the one who gets up in the mornings.

He's at school now and I thought that would mean mixing with all kids from straight nuclear families, but no. All his friends have single parents — mostly heterosexual. I don't meet any nuclear families. I've heard they exist. Maybe they're all self-contained. But all we single working mothers gravitate towards each other for child care arrangements and so on.

Alan talks about his home life to his teachers quite a lot. I know he told them about a holiday we had with my girlfriend. I don't know what they

think. But there's kids from all sorts of different races and types of families in that school. It's an inner city, multi-racial school – not middle class. We don't stick out particularly as "abnormal". There's a lot of kids in the class, the teachers are busy and they're not that interested in me, that is unless Alan starts causing them to worry. If he starts behaving in an anti-social way, then they'll all look at me and then they're going to start saying, "Well, it's because she leads a deviant lifestyle" which is very unfair. But at the moment because he's an ordinary, well-adjusted child they don't take any interest in me. I get him to school on time and everybody's happy; but come the day he gets caught shoplifting or something I'll have them all on my back, social services, the lot – I know that.

There's never been any problems with school. Those might come later. Other kids might tease or bully him in the playground. But I think they'd only use that to pick a fight if they wanted to pick a fight with him anyway. That's something that, if it happens one day, I don't know how I'll cope with it. If he ever comes home beaten up and a crowd of kids have been saying "Your mum's a lezzie" I just don't know how I'll cope.

But I can't afford to worry about things when they're not happening. I've got to be realistic about what can happen, and what being a lesbian means in certain situations, and I've got to be prepared to deal with it. And I know how I will. Where he's concerned I don't want to go around carrying any banners pronouncing to the world that I'm a lesbian. I would never go to his school wearing a lesbian badge. That's just being sensitive to his world. It's not fair to load things onto his shoulders. I don't think that's dishonest or contradictory.



"I get him to school on time and everybody's happy"

Because Alan is a boy I want him to have relationships with men. I think it's really important. I've got friends who are men whom I see occasionally but I spend most of my time with women. I couldn't have a man around I didn't like because it's "good for the boy". That just wouldn't work. There's not many men I do want to spend time with so I particularly value the men who come to this house as boyfriends of the other women living here. They're good with Alan. He can relate to them and they don't demand any energy from me. Coming out as a lesbian, there was always a worry that if I'm not sexually dependent on men then there'll be no need for them in my life and that would be a loss to Alan. I try not to say things in front of Alan about men which are too damning. I want him to be aware of what many men are like and what society says men should be like and I want to be honest and let him know what I think of that, but I don't want him to feel guilty or second rate about the fact that he's going to be a man. That's a very difficult path to tread. You have to be so careful.

Alan's father has never taken any interest in him. He would if there was anything in it for him. When he says he wants a photo of his son it's just out of vanity, not caring about him. He knows I'm a lesbian and he thinks it's a challenge — he'd probably want to see if he could still get me into bed. *It doesn't make him angry, it titillates him. But I'm not frightened of him posing any threat as regards custody — given what he is. Whatever he's got to throw at me he's just so . . . he's broken more of society's rules than I ever have. He's never tried to, but he couldn't scare me on that one.*

Alan can't remember his dad. His ideas about him come from the things I say. I try and say things that are positive. But I don't want there to be any contact. I've spent a lot of time agonising over that decision. Because a proper relationship couldn't develop, I imagine Alan would end up feeling hurt and let down by him. I expect his dad's still into drugs. It's my decision not to expose him to his dad, and I expect in later years Alan will accuse me of having deprived him of his dad because I have, as the lesser of two evils. But it's one of those things you can't win. I'm sorry he won't know who his dad is, I'm sure he'd love the chance to, but he doesn't go on about it. At least it's the same for an awful lot of kids — it's not as damaging to a kid as a lot of other things are.

Children need love and security and Alan certainly has that. Who needs the nuclear family? That's usually not all it's cracked up to be. It's certainly neither safe nor secure. There isn't any real permanence in his life apart from me. Other relationships change. But I really think that's true for most children. Daddy pisses off . . . or he doesn't . . . the child has two permanent figures . . . Alan's just got one, but he has as a back up a lot of close adult friends that children in more sheltered families are less likely to have. At least if I got hit by a bus tomorrow there's a lot of people around he's close to.

As far as the future is concerned I hope we'll continue to get on well as he gets older, through adolescence and into manhood. The older he gets the further apart we'll grow – that's a process from birth. I hope he'll grow up into the sort of man I can like. I'm confident that will happen because I like him at the moment, and he's not going to suddenly transform into a different person. He will adopt male attitudes that I can't identify with and I will have to sort out what is offensive, and what is just rebellion against me – and then deal with it.

There might well be problems ahead for him or for me. One day he'll turn around and accuse me of things at bad moments and there'll be hurt on both sides. But I also know that he's a happy kid and he might be just as pissed off over not being allowed to get a new pair of football boots, or something.

I know what can happen – being beaten up in the playground, being ashamed of me, rejecting me, wishing I was like his best friend's mum. It's going to be very hurtful but it's going to be much easier than trying to be straight. As things are, I'm making myself happy, and I'm making him happy and that solves all the problems for now.

PAT

Two daughters, 5 and 8 years.

The first part of my story is probably similar to many others. I knew that I was gay from the age of 14, but I was very frightened of it and so I did what turned out to be a very silly thing and got married. I had two children and a decent sort of husband – he wasn't a bad bloke, but every day was a torment. I decided one night that I would tell him that I was gay. Things had got very tough. I was taking a helluva lot of tranquilisers and I was drinking something terrible, but this was the only thing that could pacify me at the time. I remember the night I told him. I sat there cringing bracing myself, ready for the crunch, but I got quite the opposite reaction really. He more or less knew already. I don't suppose that's the sort of thing you can hide from your husband.

From there it went on. I first of all had to visit the psychiatric out-patients unit at the hospital. I saw a psycho-analyst. She was very nice. I saw her for about 6 months and then she had to leave. I think in the end she'd taken quite a shine to me herself and invited me out for a drink. She sat making eyes at me across the table, which didn't really help me much at the time! I went from her to a psycho-therapist but I didn't seem to benefit from any of the exercises he gave me to do. You see, I knew full well what was wrong with me and exercises didn't help. From then on things rapidly became worse. My husband decided he didn't like the idea of me being gay and he began to make life more difficult — mainly through verbal abuse or the occasional clout round the ear — nothing too drastic. I then started to see a psychiatrist and he was probably the best of the lot. During the period that I was seeing him I had several woman lovers and it was terrific to be able to tell him about them. Nevertheless it boiled down to the fact that nobody could really help me, it was all up to me. After I'd been seeing him for about a year he moved on and I felt totally alone, not knowing which way to turn.

Things at home were heavy now and I was quite, quite desperate. He started threatening to throw me out and promised there was no way I'd ever get the kids which made me panic even more inside. The thought of losing the kids was horrific. It was about that time I plucked up the courage to ring Lesbian Line and talked to Angela. I found a tremendous amount of comfort from talking to her, although nobody could ever understand what I was feeling inside. But it was a terrific release to realise that I wasn't the only lesbian on this earth and probably more of a relief to know I wasn't the only lesbian mother. I wasn't sure whether I'd be accepted or not because I had kids.



"The psycho-analyst took a shine to me which didn't really help me much at the time."

However at home things were going from bad to worse. I lost contact with Angela for a while which made me despair even more. He began to get very heavy. He clobbered me a few times. One particular occasion stands out in my mind. He was really laying into me and all I can remember are the two kids faces. They were sat screwed up on a chair, screaming – it was horrible. I kept yelling “*Not in front of the kids*” but it didn’t make any difference. I’ll never forget their faces, sat there huddled together.

At that point I was trying to find a way of getting away with the kids but he made sure I couldn’t. He told me he’d fight me in Court for them and there was no way I would get them, because of what I was. So I ended up having a nervous breakdown. I lost a fortnight completely, I’ve no idea where it went. I’ve no idea what happened in that two weeks. At that point I felt like committing suicide. I managed to get in touch with Angela again and felt a bit better. At least there was somebody to talk to, somebody that understood what I was going through.

I started to get more into the gay scene. That aggravated the situation at home, but it was a definite release for me. I had to be with lesbians – I only felt comfortable with lesbians. I got bolder and bolder. I started going out as often as I dared push my luck and I was even cheeky enough to have my lover call round to the house. I did lots of obvious things to get him out of the room – persuading him to go for a drink with his mates, and things like that. I suppose I was very lucky. Most blokes would have stuck a knife in my back at that point. He either went out or let me go out to get me out of the way. Often I would stay out until four or five in the morning, but I always made sure that the kids weren’t neglected. I was always there in the morning to get their breakfast, get them ready for school and be a good mother to them. I think the only way the kids were affected at that time was by his temper, his anger and frustration. I can understand it now. It must have been terrible for him, he knew full well what I was doing when I went out. On one occasion he got up in the morning to go to work. I’d been out the night before. He came back into the house and said to me, “*You’re disgusting.*” I said, “*Why? What’s up?*” Even he had to laugh. There was muddy footprints all over the inside roof of the car!!

We rarely laughed though. I really went down. Eventually I could see that the kids were beginning to suffer. I’d put them to bed and go out but it got to the stage where I was reaching for the bottle as soon as I woke up. I was always depressed. I was always drunk. I was drugged up to the eyeballs. I can admit to myself now I was probably an alcoholic. A bottle of Bacardi was nothing every day and an average 15 pints of beer every night. It’s a wonder I didn’t kill myself that way. Somehow I still managed to look after the kids. They were all I lived for – they were everything. I had to hang on. I had to keep going for their sake. But he had other ideas. He wanted me out, and there was no way he was going to let me have

those kids. I know every mother loves their kids, but I think I loved mine too much. I was over-protective. They really were everything to me.

And then my girlfriend finished with me. I felt I had to do something. I could feel another breakdown looming. I remember many times talking to Angela on the phone and more or less admitting that I knew what I had to do, but I wasn't sure that I had the courage to do it. I arranged to go away for a week alone to think things over and try to sort myself out. I sat in the hotel getting pissed and I kept writing everything I was feeling and when I was sober I'd read through it. Reading back I sounded like somebody in the condemned cell. I was **really** down. I should imagine I was living on the point of suicide every second. I didn't know where to go, what to do, who to turn to. I just kept seeing the faces of my two little girls. Two days later I was on the way home. I missed them so much I couldn't cope without them. I hadn't sorted anything out. I was just as confused. I can't really describe what I was feeling. It was an all time low.

The kids really cheered me up. As soon as I saw them they were jumping up and down, dead excited. They were really thrilled 'cos I was back. For weeks after they kept saying, "*You came back early mummy 'cos you was missing us.*" I didn't half cry a lot at that time.

On that Friday I went to the disco, and met a woman, Julia, who bowled me over. She was the most beautiful thing in the world. For the first time I stayed out all night. When I went home the following morning he was sat in his armchair with his arms folded. He didn't say anything. He just sat and stared at me. He hadn't been to bed – he'd sat there all night, (– luckily, 'cos he was too weak to bop me at that point). Later that day he took me to one side and said "*Right this just can't go on any more. You've either got to pull yourself together or get out.*" I pondered it for a while. What could I do? I loved my kids. I didn't want to hurt them. I didn't give two shits about whether I hurt him or not. But at the same time I was gay. For all those years I'd been bottling it up. It wasn't a healthy thing to do to myself. Everybody needs to love and be loved and I was no exception. I knew the kids loved me and I loved them. But it's a different type of love. I needed to be loved by a woman, I needed a woman to love.

I kept going into the kids' bedroom at night and sitting on the end of the bed. It hurt like hell my love for them. I knew I had to do something for their sakes because they were suffering through me. I felt I wasn't a mother to them – I wasn't living, I was merely existing. I knew what I'd have to do, but I didn't have the courage.

I kept seeing Julia at weekends and he seemed to encourage me. He even allowed me to stay out one night with her in a hotel. I had to promise to be back at a certain time in the morning. I found it quite strange that he was doing this. It boggled my mind even more. By this time I'd fallen in love and wanted to be with Julia, but it meant sacrificing the kids. I had to think hard. I had to make the hardest decision of my life and I eventually made it.

I remember when I told him. The kids were in bed. We were just sat watching telly. I hadn't even prepared myself for it. I just turned round and said *"I've made up my mind, I'm going."* It seemed as though a weight had lifted not only off my shoulders but his too. I don't think he could cope with me anymore. I could see the damage I was doing to the kids and this decision was based on the fact that I loved them enough to take that step. I didn't want to harm them. My depression and all the trouble with him was making them unhappy. I wanted what was best for them. I'd heard so many stories about lesbian mothers losing custody in the Courts and I knew I wouldn't stand a chance of getting them. I knew too that they'd be okay with him because he was very domesticated and good with them.

A week later I was packed and ready to go. I had the task of telling the girls that I was leaving. How do you tell a 4 and 7 year old that you're leaving them? I sat them down and explained that mummy and daddy didn't get on very well and kept arguing. They nodded, yes, they knew that. It was making mummy poorly. They said, yes, they knew that. I said I was going to live in a new house and they would stay with daddy and I'd come and see them as often as I could. As little as she was, the eldest just patted my arm and said *"You'll soon get better won't you mum?"* I said *"Of course I will and I'll come and see you soon."* I don't think they understood really, which is maybe just as well 'cos I don't think I could have coped if there had been any fuss.

The following morning he took the children to visit my mother and let me use the car to move my stuff. I returned the car later that day when the kids were in bed and got the train back. That was the longest night of my life. It was sheer Hell. I was very, very unhappy. I was staying in a house with a woman artist — a friend of Julia's mother. She was nice but I felt even more alone. Julia was a ¾ hour bus ride away at college and couldn't get out during the week. I only saw her at weekends. I didn't last very long there. I came back nearer home and managed to get a job. I missed the kids like hell, but I found that with every day that passed I became stronger. I stopped drinking and gradually came off the drugs. Things got even better when Julia moved in with me a couple of months later.

Even after two years it's never easy saying goodbye to the girls when I've spent the day with them. They cry and hang on to me and it's really shitty having to prise their fingers open and leave them. At the beginning he said I could see them once a fortnight and see how things went and that's still how it is. I once asked if I could see them once a week but he refused. The problem is that he's got such a hold — he's got all this power over me. If I put a foot wrong I can't see the kids. I can now have them here in my own flat which is quite a breakthrough, because there was a time when I had to go round to his house and sit there with him watching over me. God knows what he thought I was going to do to them. But the only reason he agreed to me having them here is because he's got another woman and she can only get away from her husband on Saturdays when she goes shopping in town. So he drops them off here and goes off to see her. The kids can't

sleep here because we haven't got room, so I'm trying desperately to get a job to buy my own house and then if he's still with her he might let them stay overnight. If he finished with her he might take it all back, so I'm very cautious about how I deal with him. I know that if I took it to Court to get access sorted out they probably wouldn't take away the little I have got, but I won't go and I suppose it boils down to fear that they will stop me seeing them.

The kids have accepted it extremely well, on the whole. They've settled down. They're both doing well at school, and I'm very proud of them. And I suppose, looking back I did the right thing. At least they've still got a mother. If I'd held on very much longer I don't suppose they'd have one at all. It's hell though watching them grow up, not being able to have any say in how to bring them up. It's hard especially at Christmas time and Birthdays. Christmas isn't the same without kids is it?

One day, when they're older and can speak for themselves, and do what they want, I might get them back. But I'll have missed a big chunk of their little lives.

SHARON **Aged 28**

Two children, 5 and 6 years.

I got married when I was 21 but we'd been living together before that – for nearly a year in fact. I think we got married partly because we both wanted children, but marriage was the sort of thing everyone was doing. All my friends were married by that time.

He was 6 years older than me, he wanted to settle down, get a house, have a family. He wasn't the sort of bloke who was well liked by anybody. He could be violent and he'd always been possessive but I thought getting married and settling down would improve his behaviour. I thought it would all change when we got married.

I became pregnant almost straight away, which pleased him immensely. We planned the next pregnancy very soon after the first and during both pregnancies he was very caring and supportive to me. He looked after me when I was ill, and so on. He was really content.

I'd never been able to have any sort of social life because of his possessiveness – no nights out with the girls or anything. But after I'd had the children I began to get involved with a local community group. He didn't like this at all. He was quite resentful. The two friends I made through

this were a male worker and a lesbian worker. At first he was jealous about me being friends with this man, but as my friendship with the lesbian developed he started accusing me of sleeping with her. She would often call round to our house. I started going to women's discos sometimes. I liked them because you don't get the business of men chatting you up. That should have reassured my husband, but it didn't; he was really suspicious.

I hadn't actually thought about lesbians myself. My friendship with this woman was really close but not at all sexual. I was just learning how little I got from men in terms of support and understanding, and how much I got from contact with women. My husband couldn't see that having feelings for someone does not necessarily mean having sex with them.

He got worse. The possessiveness and suspicion increased until one night he exploded and beat me up. I was quite badly hurt and had to go to hospital. He had caused internal bleeding. It really frightened me to realise what he was capable of. I warned my friend that she might be in danger and that she must stay away from our house. Instead she contacted Women's Aid for me. They helped me to get an Injunction and I went to stay with my mother for a bit. I also started separation proceedings at this point, which made him panic. A social worker got involved and I was eventually persuaded to go back to him. I didn't have any alternatives sorted out for me or the children, so I thought we'd try again, give it another chance. I went back, but I kept up contact with my friends and kept on doing community work in the area.

Things didn't improve. We still weren't getting on. He got himself involved in some shady business deal, he was fiddling money and I didn't want anything to do with it. So I left again and this time I thought my mother could have the children until I got myself set up with a job and somewhere for us to live. I didn't realise the mistake I was making until suddenly, the next thing I know is he's kidnapped them from my mother's. I called the Police, who found them but couldn't do anything. The children were safe and with their legal father so it was now up to the Courts. I had already started legal separation proceedings but he filed for divorce. When I went down to the Magistrates' Court to get a separation Order, they wouldn't deal with custody. Divorce proceedings had been started by him in the County Court and that overrides the action I had begun. They did allow me reasonable access though. I'd had none before.

Up until this time I still wouldn't have termed myself a lesbian. I'd never had a sexual relationship with a woman. My husband put in his divorce petition that I had lesbian friends who had an unnatural influence over me. He couldn't bring himself to say that I was a lesbian. I had moved into a house which was shared by two other women who were both lesbians. Access to my children had to be at his house, with him present. He would not allow me to bring them into contact with the women in my house. I could only have staying access at my parents' house which was miles away. Around this time I became lovers with Annie — one of the women in the house.

I'd heard about a feminist barrister in London who'd won some really difficult cases, so I got her to help me with the divorce and to go for Interim Custody. She managed to get weekly access arrangements and Christmas access for me. The County Court at this point ordered Welfare Reports. Annie and I travelled to London to see this barrister, thinking she knew we were having a relationship but would agree not to reveal it. It turned out she didn't know and once told, refused to continue representing me unless I was open about it. She couldn't lie, she said. So I had a choice of sacking the barrister or fighting as an "out" lesbian. I sacked her, got another one, and from there on said it was all in my husband's head. He had no proof. Annie and I decided that that was how it had to be played, like it or not, and if it had been played any other way we would have lost custody. After all, he had a lot going for his side of the case: He had them living with him, he had a nice house, he wasn't working, he had helpful relatives. His allegations against me were very serious. My new barrister never knew about my relationship with Annie, and even to this day I'm reluctant to be up front about lesbianism.

Preparation for the big case went on for the next 1½ years. All the time the children were living with him. Welfare Reports were being drawn up – that was going to take a year and I couldn't get the terms of access changed in the meantime. I still had to travel to my parents' for weekend access, and tea-time access had to be on neutral territory – cafes. If I took them to friends' houses, those friends then might have been called to testify in Court. I hated getting friends involved, although they all said they wanted to help. But the children were still not allowed into my house. We did the house up, decorated and got photographs of the bedroom where we wanted the children to sleep – of course we showed dolls in the photos! Everything had to be "normal" – especially me. The first time the



"I obviously didn't fit his stereotype of a lesbian."

Welfare Officer met me, he admitted he was quite taken aback. I obviously didn't fit his stereotype of a lesbian. He actually said "*I was imagining someone about 14 stone, with short hair, wearing boots and jeans after what I'd heard.*"

For a while it was uncertain in whose favour the Welfare Officer would report. And I did consider getting an independent Report, but the Welfare Officer was impressed with me and began to get annoyed with my husband. He discovered my husband had been lying about certain trivial things, which discredited him generally. He was also being really bloody minded about access arrangements, and generally unco-operative, which was not in the children's interests, or in anyone's.

As soon as the Reports were finished we put in for Interim Custody again. We lost. But we did win the right to have the children come to our house, because the Welfare Officer thought where we were living was okay, despite my husband's absurd allegations about the "goings-on" there.

By now the case had gone from Divorce (County) Court to the High Court. I thought I really was losing custody because the children had been with him for so long now. I knew the Welfare Officer thought they were being looked after well, his parents were very helpful, my husband was at home during the day, and had proved himself a capable father. I was doing a course at College and it just seemed everything was against me. As soon as the children began to visit me at my house, my husband started making allegations about things that were supposed to have happened while they were there. After each visit, he pressurised them for information, which was really bad. Then he went to such extremes to make allegations out of it, that he made himself look absurd in the eyes of those involved. His obsession with terms of access went against him even more.

Before we went to Court, I had to go through "role play" with my barrister. I was incredibly well-briefed, down to the last detail on what I would be asked, how I should respond, what I should and shouldn't say. In Court I played the part of a professional mother with two young children. I dressed and acted accordingly. I wore make-up and a smart suit. I actually fitted in with their system. I answered all the questions very politely and cried at the appropriate moments. That's what it's all about. You can't knock it and you can't fight it – not in the ways you'd like to.

I was asked if I was a lesbian, if I'd ever had a lesbian relationship. Had I ever had a sexual relationship with another woman? A book of mine which contained feminist cartoons was produced and I was asked "*Doesn't this imply you have lesbian tendencies?*" I said no to everything. I think the judge wanted to see, among other things, that I wasn't easily riled, that I was calm and had thought things out.

My husband and his parents on the other hand came over under

cross-examination as bigoted and unreasonable people who hated me more than they loved the children. His parents said if I won they'd never have anything more to do with the children. The judge was appalled.

A lesbian friend was cross-examined and was very articulate, and answered his questions about the politics of lesbianism. She had to explain why she had sent me a postcard signed "In Sisterhood", and what the significance of the women's symbol was. I think they stopped questioning her because they weren't sure what else to ask!

Annie was cross-examined. She was asked if she would ever expose the children to her sexuality, ever let them see her nude, or in bed with a woman. She said no. She said she liked children and enjoyed living with them.

The judge was impressed with how the children seemed of utmost importance to everyone that spoke on my side. The Court realised we were all putting the children first. I was asked a lot about my relationships with men. I talked about my male friends, one in particular, from college. I said he was just a friend. I didn't go out with him, but the Court adjourned because the judge expressed a desire to meet him!

This friend got called as a witness and told the Court how he would like to marry me, was very fond of the children, but that he hadn't "pushed" it because of all my troubles. He also said he knew Annie was a lesbian and that was fine by him.

When my husband got into the witness box, his manner was stropy. He was going on in a petty way about the recent access Order because it allowed contact with lesbians. He seemed only interested in getting at me. The judge didn't want to talk to him for very long.

He awarded custody to me. He gave my husband no grounds for appeal. I dashed straight from the Court to his house where they were waiting for me. I was so happy. So were they.

In summing up, the judge said he didn't believe I was a lesbian, and that even if I had "dabbled" at some point, I was the sort of woman who would not let it influence the upbringing of the children.

My husband's case was really mishandled. His barrister didn't make the most of his vantage points. He could have played on how long he'd looked after them — nearly 2 years. His whole case depended on slighting me, my friends and living situation. There's no doubt in my mind that had he presented the case better, he would have won. Having lost, he said he only wanted access once every 6 weeks! The Court was surprised at that after all this fuss.

The things which contributed to my winning the case were being a "professional" woman, well-respected by my colleagues and also having such good friends. I couldn't have gone through that period in my life without all their help and support.

Annie and I knew all along, even before I identified myself as being a lesbian, that to "come out" would have affected the case disastrously. In short, I would have lost. And it was actually more important to win than to be politically correct.



GOING TO COURT*

Despite the fact that most of the women we've talked to haven't been to court, fear of the courts hangs over us, and it's as well to know a bit about the legal situation.

There is no set of guidelines to follow. Each woman's situation is unique and only she can decide how best to handle it. But there are points which we can draw attention to, points which need a woman's careful consideration. We are not pretending we can advise on any particular course of action which will solve problems.

Being a lesbian mother attracts hostility and therefore problems, whatever the woman's marital status or living situation, but here we're concentrating on married women. This chapter will mainly deal with custody disputes that end up in court, or are likely to. If you're likely to be going through a court case you will need more than this pamphlet. You will need friends, a good solicitor, and more knowledge about the legal system than we can include here.

TAKE CARE – The Golden Rule

Who knows you're a lesbian? Do you think it's a good idea for your husband to find out, if he hasn't already? He can if not now, then at some future date, use any information he has against you in a damaging way. If there's a custody dispute (and even if he's charm itself at the moment, he can always turn on you) he will want evidence in order to discredit you as a fit mother. Things that can be used as evidence are: love letters, your physical appearance (butch?), newsletters, lesbian literature, the company you keep, feminist literature, and obviously who you sleep with. Remember, things that seem to you irrelevant in your role as mother, can be twisted and used against you. Do your children know? If they do, you have the benefit of enjoying an open and honest relationship with them, whilst at the same time, you are in danger of them telling the wrong people. If they don't, you're safe from that at least, but you may find it a strain having to hide such a big part of yourself from your children.

***This chapter relates to court procedure in England and Wales. See contact numbers for Scotland and Ireland.**

If at any time you're tempted to go off on your own for a while to think things out, leaving the kids at home, then bear in mind that this can be used as further evidence of being an unfit mother.

Splitting up can be a relief for everyone, and can be amicable, or it can be the beginning of a very long and bitter fight.

Settling out of court

Reaching an understanding with your husband about the children, the access and living arrangements, might be possible. It can be a verbal agreement which is informal and not binding. This situation however, leaves you vulnerable to changes. Does it mean you have to keep pleasing him to prevent him turning nasty? Are you being subtly blackmailed?

Is this understanding you have in your best interests or could you gain from a court decision? Maybe a court would agree to a better arrangement than you have at present. For instance, a court order limiting his access to weekends is surely better than him turning up whenever he chooses.



"A court order limiting his access to weekends is surely better than him turning up whenever he chooses."

Reaching agreement before you go to court

You may have an agreement which you wish to make legally binding. If this is the case, make sure you are agreeing to the best possible arrangements for yourself and the children. Find out what concessions you might be able to get out of him by looking at what has happened in other cases. Do not sign away your rights. For example, don't agree to leave the marital home if you've nowhere else to go, in exchange for a promise to keep your lesbianism out of court. Any agreement you come to with your husband regarding the children has to be approved by the judge who will then make an Order.

Contested custody

All else fails and you end up facing a contested custody case where he is bringing in lesbianism as an issue. (Remember, if he isn't raising this as an issue, there's no reason for you or your solicitor to.) You are fighting your case either openly as a lesbian or denying you are a lesbian. Either way, you need the best solicitor you can find, and you need to prepare yourself adequately for the long battle that lies ahead, paying attention to every detail.

If your reaction at this point is to 'disappear' with the kids, the chances are you will be traced eventually, and find you still have to face the court. It is also very impractical to try to bring up children living as a fugitive.

Finding a good solicitor might be easier said than done. Friends, a local lesbian phonenumber, a Law Centre or Women's Aid group may be able to recommend one. There must be someone who'll be able to tell you which would be the best solicitor for this sort of case, even if it means going further afield. Unsympathetic solicitors may feel obliged to tell the court you're a lesbian even if your husband doesn't! How open and honest you are with your solicitor is up to you, but remember solicitors can't lie to the court if asked. If you decide to lie to your solicitor, which you may well decide is the wisest thing to do, it means living a lie, perhaps forever, which is not exactly satisfactory. If there's no point lying, or you choose not to, then make sure your solicitor will conduct the case in such a way that lesbianism is not the central issue. Don't get caught up in any obsession about your sexuality. You can always change your solicitor if the one you choose lets you down.

A good solicitor, as well as being sympathetic to your case will explain to you the details of court procedure, legal aid, and the fact that you will be represented in a county court by a barrister you may not have met before. Although it may all seem complicated, it's your solicitor's job to help you understand. And it's important that you do understand what's going on and feel able to relate to your solicitor since the whole case could drag on for as long as 2 years, with hearings being postponed for one reason or another. Many court appearances may be necessary. The actual custody hearing itself usually takes 1 or 2 days being heard. It will be gruelling and upsetting. You'll need friends to see you through.

As a rule, the higher courts are more broadminded than the lower ones. Magistrates courts are notorious for making ill-considered, hasty and harsh decisions. You should make your application to the county court in the first place. If you're dissatisfied with a court decision, you should appeal, where you stand a chance of winning and are granted legal aid to appeal.

If a court case is unavoidable there are advantages in being the partner to get in first with a custody application. The applicant states the case, leaving the partner to respond. The applicant is also proving commitment by lodging the application.

What are the courts looking for?

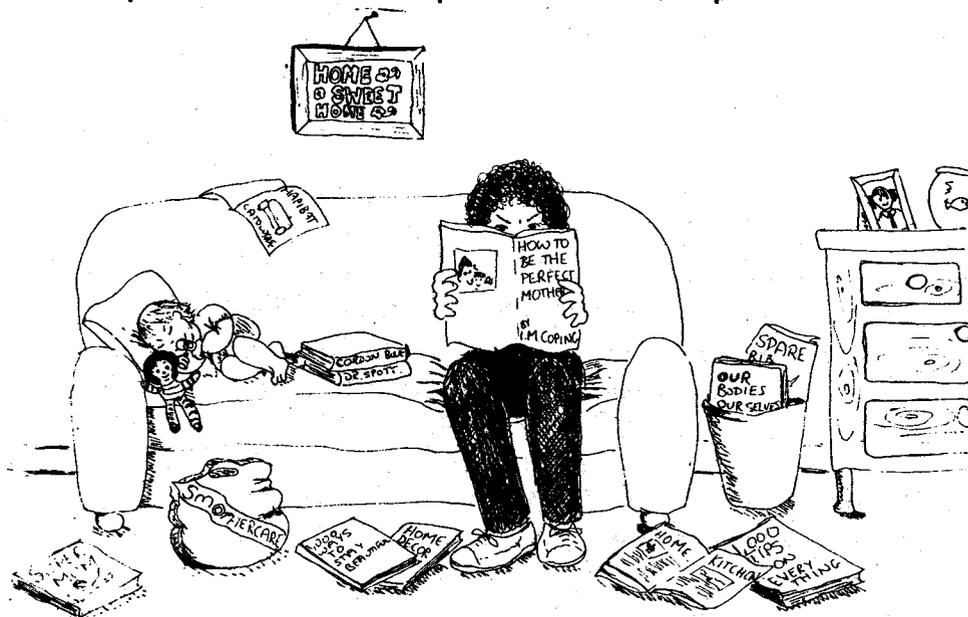
In a custody case the aim is supposedly to ensure that the children will be given to the parent who puts the children first and is best able to care for them. The judge will usually order welfare reports to be done by a social worker or court welfare officer to help him come to his decision. The court welfare officer will visit both you and your husband in your homes and interview you, and will want to see the children. You will want to show him/her that you are an efficient, capable and loving mother. But while you want to prove your commitment, do not dwell on your personal worries or problems, e.g. depression or anxieties. You will have to look at the life you lead through the eyes of the courts, remembering that unconventional ways of life are seen by them as damaging to the upbringing of a 'normal' child.

The court will expect you to have well thought out plans for the care of the children. Is the house big enough? Is it safe? The important thing about your home is not how smart and expensive it is, but whether it is geared towards having kids around. It should be clean (but not meticulously clean and tidy which would be a sign that you're an obsessive). Toys scattered around the floor is a 'good' sign. The children should have a separate bedroom which you should try and make as attractive as possible: – photographs may be asked for. Do the girls play with dolls and the boys with tractors? That might sound ludicrous but there's no knowing how far things will be taken.

Like most women, especially single mothers, you won't have much money, or much choice about where you live. Make sure that you're getting any benefit, rebate or grant that you may be entitled to. Check at the nearest advice centre. The court will also want to see that you can manage financially.

If you go to work, what arrangements are there for the children? How are they doing at school? Keep school reports. Do they attend regularly? And always get picked up on time?

You might be forgiven for thinking that because you're a lesbian, you're expected to be more perfect than the perfect mother!



“You might be forgiven for thinking that because you're a lesbian, you're expected to be more perfect than the perfect mother!”

The way you live is going to be under close examination. Anything unconventional will not be looked upon favourably, for example living in squats or communes. Evidence of political activity, i.e. feminist or radical posters and books lying around, is best avoided, and definitely no erotica!

Since one of the main fears of the courts is that children from a lesbian household will be brought up to be gay themselves, it may help to show that you're not bringing the children up as 'man-haters'. Produce male friends as witnesses. Show that your children's lives are as much like any children's from a heterosexual family.

Periods of absence

The parent living with the children at the time of the court hearing is in a strong position, as the courts are normally reluctant to uproot children from their present home. If the children are with you, the longer this has been so since the marriage broke up, the easier it will be for you. If however, you left your children with your husband but want custody, your position will be very difficult. The courts will also be interested in any periods in the past when either you or your husband has lived away from home.

Caring for the children

You will have to show the courts that you take a healthy interest in your children's well-being and that you spend time with them, e.g. on trips out. It may be worth keeping a diary where you record outings together. The welfare officer will want to see evidence of the warmth of your relationship with your children. For example, do they run to you when they see you, or climb on your lap? The welfare officer will want to talk to them. The older they are the more their wishes and preferences will be taken into consideration. Children as young as 7 or 8 may be asked for their preferences.

Letting him have access

The courts like to see children kept in touch with their other parent, grandparents, uncles, aunts etc. It's important to allow this while remembering that your husband may use access as a

way of getting back at you or gathering information about you to use against you. If this is happening and you think the access is proving upsetting for the children tell your solicitor. Try and arrange to have other adults present to safeguard them and/or you. It is very difficult to get access stopped unless you can prove fairly severe damage to the child.

Your husband

While the case is under the courts try to deal with your husband only through your solicitor. If he starts being violent or threatening violence towards you or the children, your solicitor can get an injunction to keep him away. His violent behaviour which is designed to intimidate you can instead help you persuade the courts that he is not fit to live with. However, remember it's not how he has treated you that matters but the way he is towards the children.

While showing that you can provide a decent home, stable schooling etc, your position will be stronger if you show the court that he cannot. Your chances of winning the case might come down to your showing him to be an unfit father. If he remarries, his chances of winning may increase, since he will be providing a 'normal' family for the children. So in general, gather what evidence you can. And since your memory is probably not as good as you think and will be called upon in court, keep a diary in which you can write down anything relevant to helping your case or defeating his.

Lovers

If you have a lover she will either have to be discreetly invisible, or else she will have to be relevant to the court case. She will not only have to support you through an emotionally difficult time, but also a lot will be demanded of her. The court will also want to test her fitness to be around children, especially if you live together. Hopefully your lover will be sensitive and responsible in how she reacts to the situation, whether she's visible or invisible.

Witnesses and other support

In preparing for the court case, see who's around who could appear in court to support you. The best witnesses are members

of the family and people who have a respected position in the community, e.g. teachers, your employer if you're working. Your solicitor should advise you on which witnesses to call, how many and what they should and should not say.

The period leading up to the court case will be nerve wracking and exhausting and you will need as much support as you can get from friends and relatives.

PREVIOUS CASES

The only lesbian custody cases we hear about are those that go to appeal (in the Court of Appeal) for otherwise custody cases are not allowed to be reported in the press. The Court of Appeal is considered more liberal and progressive than the lower courts, but this does not mean that lesbians will always win custody. Some lesbians **have** won custody because there has been no realistic alternative. For example in a case reported in Spare Rib in January 1977, three Appeal judges gave custody of eleven year old twin girls to their lesbian mother. But the judges, **"bent over backwards to dissociate themselves from making any judgement 'for or against homosexual parents'."** The decision was mainly based on the father's inability to give the children a home. The judges made it clear that they were most reluctant to award custody to a lesbian who was **'obsessively involved in herself and the feminist cause.'** Their decision was swayed by the fact that if custody was not awarded to the mother, the girls would have been taken into the Care of the local authority.

The same decision was arrived at by the Court of Appeal early in 1983 when again the choice was between a five year old girl being taken into Care or living with her lesbian mother. The High Court Family Division had already agreed that the girl should remain with her mother, but the father appealed against the decision. In turning down the appeal the Appeal Court judges felt **"uneasy"** about the girl staying with the mother. They said that the possible effects of homosexuality on children living in close proximity to those practising it were of public concern. One judge said it was not necessary to be a psychiatrist to know that a lesbian household would be the subject of **embarrassing conduct.** However, in this case the mother was **"a**

sensitive, articulate and understanding woman” who had been described as “discreet” about her lesbianism.

There are far more examples of lesbians losing custody. In a case in 1976 concerning a four year old, the judge, after listening to evidence from psychiatrists, professors and many other people, some sympathetic, some unsympathetic, found in favour of the father, and concluded on the subject of the mother's sexuality, **“I distinguish clearly between understanding and sympathy and acceptance and approval. It would mean the decay of society if people adopted the latter attitude. We definitely cannot have approval. It would be detrimental – anyone might be influenced if it were approved of.”** The judge twice referred to the difficulty of making decisions in **“uncharted waters”**. But rather than fully explore those waters, he saw his choice between on the one hand a stigmatised **“deviant”** and on the other a **“normal”** traditional father (with a mother substitute in tow).

Most men who have custody do not actually look after children themselves. They get another woman to do it for them, usually their mothers, new wives or girlfriends.

In another case heard in 1978, the mother's claim to care and control rested on the fact that the child was very young (five years old). She had cared for him since birth, he was used to living with her and her partner and he was happy at school where he had made friends. The father's case was that it was wrong for a little boy to be brought up in a lesbian household. The headmistress and many relatives gave evidence on behalf of the mother. The father had used violence towards the mother and her lover, which the judge deplored but decided threw no light on his conduct as a father. The judge commented on the mother's lack of femininity and her lover's previous lesbian relationships which might indicate that the present relationship would not last long. He added that the boy might be mocked if brought up in a lesbian household and this would cause him **“incalculable pain and harm”** and that the child would not grow up to understand a **“normal”** relationship of husband and wife. The judge's concluding remarks were that **“the child would be upset at leaving his mother, but he seems to be resilient and adaptable.”** On being awarded custody, the father emigrated, taking the little boy with him.

The way a court decision is reached varies according to the particular judge who is presiding. Different judges' summing up

remarks and rulings contradict each other because they are founded, not in law, but in their own particular attitude towards lesbianism: and that may be liberal or reactionary. But it is true to say that to a greater or lesser degree judges, magistrates, social workers, probation officers, court welfare officers all disapprove of unconventional ways of life:— this includes single parenthood, living communally, holding feminist ideas as well as homosexuality. There is no evidence, and none is required, that a child's development suffers as a result of their parent's unconventional way of life. Custody disputes are supposedly decided in the interests of the children, and we would agree that a person's ability as a parent, their ability to provide a loving home are crucial. But sexuality is seen as relevant to this. Indeed the courts show an incredible obsession with a mother's sexuality, often probing into the most bizarre and irrelevant details.

There are not many custody cases fought where the issue of lesbianism is openly stated. When it is, and when the case is contested by the father, custody will be awarded to the father unless there is any serious drawback on his side, for example homelessness.

Lesbian custody cases make good press reading. However, as we said earlier only those that go to appeal may be reported. So we have no idea how many cases there really are, what happened in those cases and why women didn't or couldn't appeal.

We did not approach anyone for interview who had fought and lost her children in court as we believe it would be too distressing to relive such a painful experience. We hope, though, that the cases we have quoted here will give at least a glimpse of what we are up against when we take on the judicial system.

Finally, as the exception which proves the rule, a lesbian mother recently (April '83) won custody of her children in the Court of Appeal, overturning a decision made in Bath County Court in 1980. The judge said **"the mere fact that a parent was a homosexual was no reason to refuse care and control of a child, and the children, aged 7 and 8, want to live with their mother instead of their father and new wife."** This was indeed a victory, especially since the children had been living with their father. It does NOT, however, set a legal precedent, but it does perhaps offer us a ray of hope.

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The Women's Center

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